DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 343 RC 017 822

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TITLE Personality Factors and Political Behavior in Rural Older Americans.
PUB DATE Aug 89
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (97th, New Orleans, LA, August 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Citizen Participation; *Individual Differences; Interviews; *Older Adults; Personality Studies; *Personality Traits; Political Affiliation; *Political Attitudes; Rural Areas; *Rural Population

ABSTRACT

In past research, the most well-known and validated models explaining political behavior have focused on socioeconomic factors and have ignored personality variables. Based on personal interviews with 358 New York rural residents 60 years of age and over, this paper examines the relationships of political behavior and attitudes to personality differences in extraversion, openness, neuroticism, and locus of control. Controlling for age, sex, group consciousness, and education, Pearson coefficients revealed that personality factors had an independent effect on the political behavior and attitudes of the samples. Internal locus of control, extraversion, and openness were positively correlated with political efficacy, interest, and participation, and negatively correlated with political distrust, while neuroticism had high negative correlations with political efficacy and interest. Path analyses showed personality also had an indirect effect via civic orientations and, perhaps, education. This report contains 26 references. (Author/SV)

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ED326343

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RC017822

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Personality Factors and Political Behavior in Rural Older Americans

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In past research, the most well-known and validated models explaining political behavior have generally been based on"socioeconomic factors" and have ignored personality variables. We looked at individual differences in extraversion, openness, neuroticism (NEO Inventory) and locus of Control (Rotter). Controlling for age, sex, group consciousness and education, Pearson coefficients revealed that personality factors had an independent effect on the political behavior of 358 rural older Americans residing in upstate New York. Path analyses showed personality also had an indirect effect via civic orientations and perhaps education. Our results suggest theoretical frameworks must take into account personality variables in predicting political behavior in the aged.

Interest in examining the role of personality in adult development has waxed and waned over the years. Recently, however there has been renewed interest in personality change and adult development (McCrae and Costa, 1984). The past research on personality and aging has looked at the influence of personality on a wide range of issues from its role in decision making to its impact on social activity and well-being in the aged. But very little research, if any, has looked at the influence of personality variables on the political activity of the aged despite the fact that the elderly collectively are more political active than any other age group and are currently the fastest growing segment of our population. These factors combined suggest that an understanding of the elderly's political behavior is increasingly becoming a very important subject of research.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the independent influences personality dispositions have on the political life and political behavior of rural Americans. In the past ethnic identity, education, socioeconomic class (SES), and geographic region were highly predictive of political activity predicting such things as party identification, partisan politics and voting behavior. In the face of these powerful traditional variables, the force of individual differences in personality dispositions in predicting political activity appears inconsequential. While clearly SES factors are very important predictors of political behavior, we believe it is not unreasonable to assume that

personality also independently impacts on the political behavior of people. This may be particularly true in the contemporary zeitgeist of political individualism. American voters today vote for politicians on the basis of their personal beliefs and values rather than simply mirror their social class or family background. With few exceptions, pollsters can no longer accurately predict the political activity of people simply by Assessing their ethnic roots or SES. Assessing their personalities, we contend, will increase the understanding of political scientists about the political behavior of older Americans. It seems obvious to us that personality dispositions of people at least partially guides their political attitudes, political beliefs, political values, and political behavior.

Personality Traits have been defined (McCrae and Costa, 1988) as the enduring set of characteristics or dispositions that determine interpersonal, experiential, attitudinal and emotional styles. Past research has shown that a taxonomy of five trait factors are important in understanding personality (Norman, 1963). These factors include extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and culture. From these five factors, we selected three traits having been well-established and the original domains assessed by the NEO Inventory. These are the traits of extroversion, neuroticism, and openness. (See Costa and McCrae, 1985; McCrae and Costa, 1988, for further review.) discontent and political efficacy (Milbrath and

Goel, 1977)

There have been few, if any, studies looking at the effects of personality factors on the political behavior on the aged. However, the personality factors of locus of control (knutsen, 1973; Milbrath and Goel, 1977; Stone, 1981), extroversion (Stone, 1974; Hughes, 1975), openness (Elizabeth and Peterson, 1984; Stone, 1980; Sullivan et al., 1982; Rokeach, 1960; Fiske et al., 1983) and neuroticism (Hughes, 1975; Mussen and Wyszinnski, 1952) have been studied in younger populations. Based on the above research, the following hypotheses emerge.

1. As one's scores on internal locus of control, extroversion and openness increase, we anticipate that one's political efficacy, political interest, and political participation increase and political distrust decreases.

2. On the contrary, as one's neuroticism score increases we anticipate that one's political efficacy, political interest, and political participation decrease while political distrust should increase.

3. we also predict that personality factors will go with the following variables. Neuroticism will be associated with the party reflecting feelings of increased alienation and less hope. Extraversion will go with the party symbolizing conservative values and "tough mindedness." Openness will relate to the party most perceived as embodying

intellectual and cultural values, liberality and racial tolerance.

The standard model for predicting political behavior is Verba and Nie's (1972) socioeconomic model which is well-known and well-validated. However, it leaves no room for personality variables. As there is no adequate model accomodating personality and political behavior, we propose the following. We assume that personality and social forces particularly in early life are interactive. Thus in our model personality and social class have a direct impact on participation as well as an indirect effect through civic orientations. The model presented here guides data analyses later in this paper. The basic socioeconomic variable we use is the individual's level of education. Cutler (1977) contends that for older Americans education reflects social class background and is one of the most potent predictors of political activity.

III. Methods

In the summer of 1987, a team of trained interviewers went into the field in Allegany County, New York; by October they had completed 358 personal interviews with older Americans 60 years of age and over. A proportionate stratified random sample was used to select towns from which interviews would be carried out. Towns were stratified on the basis of both population size and geographic location (northern versus southern half of the county) to ensure that respondents would come in appropriate numbers from these

different strata. Within each town selected in this manner, names of interviewees were selected from a list provided by the county's Office for the Aging. The list provided access to about 65% of the county's elderly population. Once those randomly selected from each chosen town were drawn, interviewers attempted to set up appointments. The final response rate was 72% (number of persons contacted minus number of refusals divided by number of persons contacted).

IV. Findings

First, we summarize the factors that seem to shape personality among the rural older Americans who we are studying (See Table 1). Internal locus of control is greatest among the young-old, the educated, those with more social support and group ties, with fewer health and nutritional problems, and higher income. Extroversion and openness are quite similar to locus of control. However, with extroversion, being male also comes into play--increasing extroversion. With openness, being male and living in villages predict this personality characteristic. Those having higher scores on the neuroticism index are females, less educated, more isolated, sicker and less well nourished, and poorer residents.

Table 1 here

A first order test of the hypotheses is presented in Table 2; there is considerable support for our expectations. Internal locus of control is correlated with efficacy, interest, distrust, and participation as anticipated. As expected, locus of control is unrelated to conservatism. Extroversion is associated with efficacy, interest, distrust, and participation as predicted. Openness goes with efficacy, interest, distrust, and participation as predicted. It is associated with less conservatism as anticipated. Finally, neuroticism. This variable is correlated with efficacy, interest, and participation as called for. In addition, it is related to greater distrust and less approval of Reagan and lower odds of being Republican. Once more, this suggests that neuroticism is part of a set of forces leading to greater alienation from the system.

Table 2 here

To ensure that zero-order correlations are not spurious, some controls are necessary. Here, we control for age, sex, education, and group consciousness While correlations, overall, decline, (See Table 3) the pattern of findings continues: older Americans' personality characteristics seem to have an independent impact on their political orientations and behavior.

Table 3 here

Finally, we return to test the manner in which personality affects political participation. We find that internal locus of control, extroversion, and openness have statistically significant direct paths to participation (the path coefficients represent the standardized regression coefficients, or betas, from stepwise multiple regression), as well as indirect paths through civic orientations--precisely as predicted earlier. While neither depression nor neuroticism are directly liked with participation, against our expectations, they both have indirect impacts on political activities through their effects on civic orientations. In sum, internal locus of control, extroversion, and openness all work to enhance participation whereas neuroticism function to depress levels of political activity.

Figure 1 here

V. Summary and Discussion

Our findings support the contention that individual personality differences among older Americans predict their political orientations and actions; personality traits have an independent impact on our subjects' political behavior. Path analyses also show that personality factors have independent impacts on basic political orientations and

actions.

Although this study has apparent shortcomings, the results are important, we contend, because they shed additional light on the dynamics underlying political beliefs and choices of older Americans--the fastest growing segment of the American population and an increasingly important political force. It appears that personality traits represent one important set of factors helping to shape the political behavior of Older Americans.

Table 3. Partial Correlation Coefficients: Dependent Variables by Personality Variables (Controlling Education, Group Consciousness, Sex, and Age), N=338.

	Internal locus of control	Extraversion	Openness	Neuroticism
Political efficacy	.25****	.05	.12**	-.26****
Political interest	.23****	.16****	.13***	-.25****
Conservative	.04	.10**	-.05	.04
Approval of Ronald Reagan	.17****	.06	.02	-.15***
Republican	.11**	.12**	-.09**	-.13***
Political distrust	-.04	-.15***	-.23****	.04
Political participation	.17****	.10**	.16***	-.05

* P < .10

** P < .05

*** P < .10

**** P < .001

Table 1. Pearson's r: Correlates of Personality Variables.

	Internal locus of control	Extraversion	Openness	Neuroticism
Rural	.04	-.01	-.12**	-.01
Male	.06	.11**	.10**	-.11**
Age	-.25****	-.20****	-.23****	.02
Education	.24****	.17****	.31****	-.22****
Social support	.34****	.16****	.08*	-.23****
Group memberships	.32****	.17****	.13****	-.24****
Health problems index	-.34****	-.17****	-.09***	.22****
Poor nutrition	-.23****	-.17****	-.09***	.13***
Income	.30****	.17***	.26****	-.21****

* P < .10

** P < .05

*** P < .01

**** P < .001

Table . Pearson's r: Dependent Variables with Personality Variables.

	Internal locus of control	Extraversion	Openness	Neuroticism
Political efficacy	.32****	.12**	.22****	-.32****
Political interest	.33****	.24****	.24****	-.31****
Conservative	-.02	.05	-.12**	.07
Approval of Ronald Reagan	.16***	.05	.01	-.16****
Republican	.09**	.11**	-.08*	-.15***
Political distrust	-.07*	-.17****	-.23****	.07*
Political participation	.30****	.21****	.31****	-.16****

* P < .10

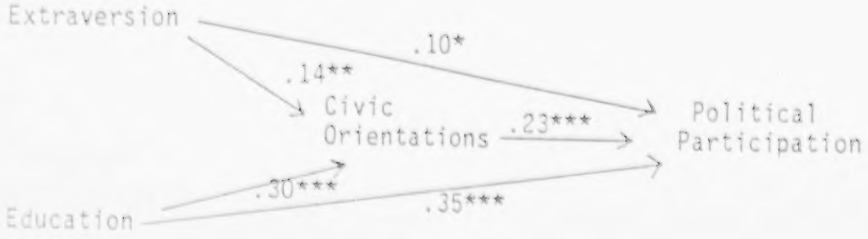
** P < .05

*** P < .01

**** P < .001

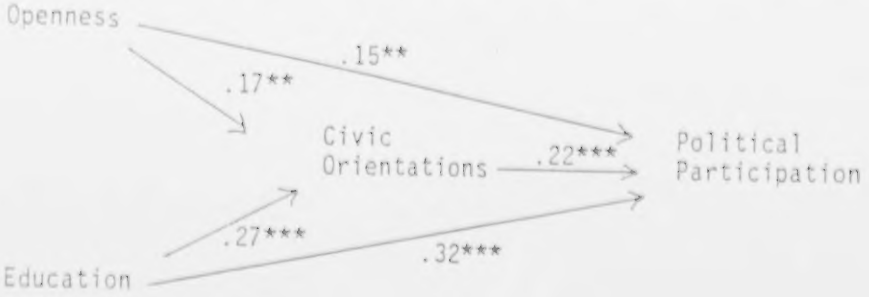
Figure 1. Path Models: Predicting Political Participation, N=355.

A.



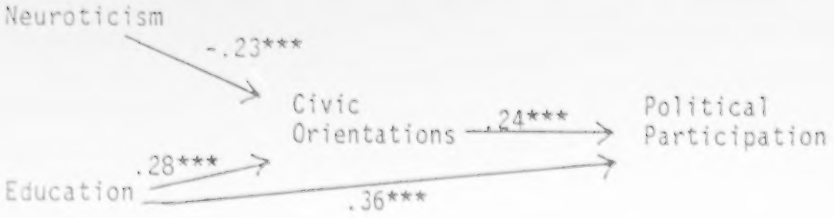
Multiple R = .50
Multiple R^2 = .25
Significance = .000

B.



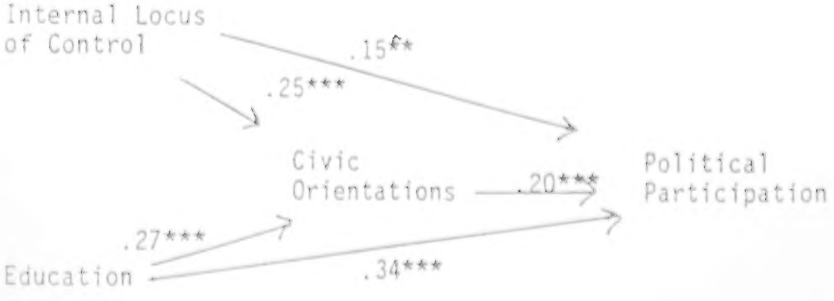
Multiple R = .51
Multiple R^2 = .26
Significance = .000

C.



Multiple R = .49
Multiple R^2 = .24
Significance = .000

D.



Multiple R = .51
Multiple R^2 = .26
Significance = .000

* P < .05
** P < .01
*** P < .001

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